

Portraits Strive to Convey Essence of Foster Children

D.C. Exhibition Aims to Find Permanent Homes

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In one framed photograph, a 14-year-old named LaShawn wears heart-shaped earrings and peers up from an open book, as if the camera interrupted her reading in mid-sentence. Nearby, a boy named Demetrius, who is 9, casts a sweet, innocent glance over his shoulder in a photograph taken in a local park.

The 16-by-20-inch portraits are part of an exhibit at Union Station that opened yesterday, a "Heart Gallery" that features more than 50 foster children from the Washington region who are waiting to be adopted. The Freddie Mac Foundation sponsored the gallery and worked with 40 amateur and professional photographers who volunteered for the project.

The first Heart Gallery appeared in New Mexico in 2001, when the state child welfare agency decided to try using professional, intimate photographs to recruit adoptive families. Since then, such galleries have appeared in many other places but never before in the Washington area.

Officials say that in addition to stirring emotion and raising awareness, the public portraits, which include short profiles about the children, have produced results. In Connecticut, social workers found adoptive homes for 19 of the 40 children featured in an exhibit, according to the Freddie Mac Foundation. And in New Mexico, about 50 percent of the people who inquired about adoption after seeing the photos completed a training and licensing process and adopted a child, compared with the average follow-up rate of 5 percent.

"We have an obligation to try many different approaches," said Maxine B. Baker, the foundation's president, at a news conference yesterday at the Washington gallery's debut.

The exhibit, which also includes photos of foster children from across the country, will hang in Union Station's West Hall, within sight of thousands of daily commuters, until Nov. 13. Afterward, it will move to several other venues, including the John A. Wilson Building, which houses D.C. government offices, the Russell Senate Office Building and various community centers. As children are adopted, their pictures will be taken down to make room for new portraits.

The gallery also can be found online at <http://www.freddiemacfoundation.org/heartgallery>.

D.C. Mayor Anthony A. Williams, who was adopted out of foster care as an infant, implored people to take on the challenging but rewarding task of becoming adoptive parents.

"Do the job," Williams (D) said yesterday as he stood in front of several of the portraits. "I wouldn't be standing here as mayor of the District of Columbia if I didn't have loving parents who adopted me."

Many of the children featured in the exhibit are considered more difficult children to place in adoptive homes because they are preteens or teenagers, have siblings, or have physical or emotional disabilities. In the District, roughly 2,700 children are in foster care and about 400 are waiting for adoptive homes.

Social worker Jenna Duffy was at the opening yesterday, excited to see the results of a photo shoot she had attended for Demetrius. He played basketball with photographer Judy Heffner in a local park, and Duffy hung back to give the two of them privacy.

As she looked at Demetrius's photo, Duffy said she was amazed that it had captured so well the boy she knows, the one who always says thank you and likes to care for horses.

"Sometimes he acts out, but he's really a sweet kid. And when you see the picture, that's who he is," said Duffy, who works for the Arlington County Department of Human Services. "This really captures his inner spirit."

Elizabeth Gross, a recruitment social worker in the District who is working to find LaShawn a home, said that after countless court appearances, therapy visits and interviews for reports, foster children learn to put up a front for whoever is asking them questions. With the photos, it was different. LaShawn was playful when she had her pictures taken.

"So often I feel like the children are defined by their stories, which often are very horrific," Gross said. "But I'm excited that they get to be portrayed as themselves."

Samantha Leibowitz, a senior at Holton-Arms School in Bethesda, volunteered to photograph Alexxus, a 9-year-old District foster child described in her profile as a "ray of sunshine." Leibowitz wanted to capture the young girl's strength and was pleased with the result.

"She's definitely looking for someone to be with," said Leibowitz, who enjoyed hanging out with Alexxus so much that she gave the girl her phone number.

"I hope she knows she can call me."